

White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*



Folk Name: White-throat, Peabody Bird

Status: Winter Resident

Abundance: Very Common to Abundant

Habitat: Woodlands, thickets, field borders, shrubs in residential areas

The White-throated Sparrow is one of our most common winter residents. It is well distributed throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Its call note, “a lispng tseet,” is commonly heard all through the fall and winter months. Its sweet, resounding song rings out in the woods along our field borders, scrubby stream banks, and under neighborhood shrubs, each spring. This sparrow is frequently a welcome visitor at backyard bird feeding stations. It is a ground-feeding bird, and it uses both feet at the same time to scratch the dirt to uncover seeds, berries, insects, and other invertebrates.

American birders often claim the song of the White-throated Sparrow sounds like the bird is singing *Ole Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody*. However, as William McIlwaine found out on a walk during an April shower, in Charlotte, in 1928, Canadian birders interpret this song quite differently:

And the white-throats were trying to show us just how sweetly a sparrow can sing, that we may be sure to miss them when they have all left us in early May. The Misses Tabor of North Church Street, themselves Canadians, claim a special proprietorship in this bird, and say he sings, “I love Canada, Canada, Canada.”

The White-throated Sparrow descends from its northern breeding grounds in large numbers each



White-throated Sparrow. (Will Stuart)



October, and most depart by the following May. Our earliest arrival dates on file for this region are 4 and 20 August, and our latest dates of departure are 9 and 14 June. It is possible these June and August birds were non-breeding wanderers. We have no reports of this bird in the region during the month of July. Our peak one-day tally is a whopping 597 birds counted on the Iredell Christmas Bird Count in 1983.

Where do our winter birds go to breed? Most breed from states bordering the Great Lakes and our New England States, north throughout Canada. One White-throated Sparrow banded by Bill Hilton Jr. at Hilton Pond in York County on April 15, 1990, was killed by a cat 16 days later in Quebec. Results from another bird banding station provided band return data indicating White-throated Sparrows had a 22% return rate to the same wintering site in North Carolina the year following their banding.

Observing the behavior of sparrows and other feeder birds can be a fascinating pastime even when you're just watching outside your back window. On March 17, 1956, Rhett Chamberlain described a brief battle between a White-throated Sparrow and an unwary Purple Finch in his backyard in the Town of Matthews. The sparrow had been dominating the feed below the feeder and was regularly lunging at other birds in an attempt to force them away. “Most of the offenders simply side-stepped and went on feeding.” Soon, a Purple Finch wandered in too close, and “the White-throat promptly seized it by the end of its tail. The finch danced desperately while the sparrow held firmly and braced itself. Neither bird used its wings and the foot-work of the finch carried the pair clockwise through a complete 360°, pivoted on the White-throat.” A moment later, the Purple Finch was able to break free, quickly fled to a nearby branch, and then quietly disappeared.

John Trott wrote a special column on the White-throated Sparrow that was published in the March/April 2000 issue of the magazine *Co-op Living*, only 6 months before he died. This full page essay, titled “The Sweet Spring Song of a Little Brown Bird,” provided full details about the white-throat and its activities in the winter. In honor of Trott’s memory, a brief portion is shared here:

On a recent overcast morning in late winter, I heard the sweet, pensive song of a White-throated Sparrow. The four notes hung in the air and turned a gray day into gold. The first, wistful low note was followed by three on a higher key that carried a serene optimism. There was hope in the song of the little brown bird. I don’t know why the bird was

singing a May song in March. ...In late April, the birds will molt, changing old feathers for new. Before leaving my yard in early May, the male’s throat will be as white as his head stripes. The brilliant yellow spots between eye and bill—his “lores”—will be bright and clear. This plumage signals his readiness to fly north and declare through song his rights to an opening in a spruce forest of New England or Canada. ...As the day of his leaving nears, the White-throated Sparrow will sing more and more on bright mornings, providing a nice start to the day. Then there’ll be that night in May when his urge to migrate sends him into the darkness and on his way north.